

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 8, September 2007

Tip of the month: write in the active, so a right-royal style is avoided

Pikestaff's royal correspondent recently donned her 'day dress with hat' to infiltrate a garden party at Buckingham Palace. Though her fervour for the cucumber sandwiches and bijou patisserie was most convincing, her undercover purpose was the pursuit of passives – of which there were ample helpings.

The problem

So what are passives – or, to be more precise, passive-voice verbs – and their opposite, active (or active-voice) verbs? At school, teachers often described verbs as 'doing words'. More accurately, they're time-action words because they express actions (or states) that take place in past, present or future time. If a verb is active, the sentence usually includes the person or thing doing the action (the 'doer'). This usually comes before the verb. After the verb comes the person or thing on the receiving end of the action (the 'receiver'), if there is one. So the following (made-up) sentence is active: *Pikestaff* [doer] *amused* [verb] *the queen* [receiver].

When a verb is passive, the receiver comes first, followed by the verb. The doer may or may not then be included. If it is, it is introduced by the word *by*. For example, the passive version of the sentence above would be: *The queen* [receiver] *was amused* [verb] *by Pikestaff* [doer]. But you could also omit the doer: *The queen was amused*.

A passive verb usually includes part of the verb 'to be' (*am, are, is, be, being, was, were* or *been*) plus the 'past participle' of the main verb (*followed, included, introduced* and *amused* in the paragraph above). Many past participles end *-ed*.

Our advice

Active verbs often make your writing clearer because:

- they use fewer words than the passive equivalent that includes 'by [the doer]', so making your sentences shorter
- they always include the doer, so making your writing more human and open (though in active-voice commands like *Eat up your greens!*, the doer (*you*) is only implied)
- their word order places less strain on the reader's short-term memory, so making your stuff easier to read.

But there are times when the passive is better, for example:

- when the doer is irrelevant, obvious or unknown
- when starting with the receiver makes your message clearer and punchier.

To convert passive verbs to active ones, ask yourself who or what is performing the action (there may already be a *by* phrase in the sentence telling you), and start the sentence with this person or thing.

Examples

Let's look now at some queenly quotes to illustrate our tip. The following passives could easily be rewritten as actives, improving the sentences. Check out (and edit out) those Pompous Initial Capitals too!

P Chains of Office may be worn.

A Guests [*or, even better, You*] may wear chains of office.

P This card may only be used by the person named on it.

A Only the person named on this card may use it.

P Under no circumstances can this card be replaced.

A We can't replace this card under any circumstances.

P No acknowledgement of this invitation is required.

A You don't need to acknowledge this invitation.

P The Chairman and Executive Committee of the Caravan Club [*oh, so that's how the press got in – Ed*] are requested by The Patron, His Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, KG, KT, to invite Ms Pikestaff to a Royal Garden Party...

A Phil has asked Bob and crew to invite you to a royal garden party... (*Well OK, the titles would probably have to stay, but you can see how we've turned the sentence round, making the verb active.*)

But the following passives are sensible:

- Tea *is served* in the Main Tea Tent throughout the afternoon.
- A taxi rank *will be provided* in front of the Grand Entrance gates.
- Mobile phones *must be switched off*.

In the first 2 examples, it would be irrelevant to say who will be serving the tea or providing the taxi rank. And the third would lose some of its impact if you rephrased it, moving *mobile phones* to a central – and less noticeable – position.

Still time to enplane for Amsterdam

You can now see the programme for the sixth conference of the Plain Language Association International, at <http://www.plain2007.com/programme-78.html>. Running from 11–14 October, this will be PLAIN's first conference outside North America. The conference takes place in the historic Beurs van Berlage, built in 1903.

The conference includes 2 full days of workshops on plain language, some in Dutch and some in English. Our research director, Martin Cutts, will be presenting one of these (mainly in English) – more on this in *Pikestaff 9*. You can also explore Amsterdam, with guided tours of the mediaeval city, the canals, various museums (including the Van Gogh), the Anne Frank House, the Island of Marken and the Ajax Amsterdam Arena.

To read more about, or register for, the conference, go to <http://www.plain2007.com/home-1.html>. To find out more about PLAIN, visit <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/>.

Lots in a name

Talking of matters multilingual, have you ever wondered why we're called Plain *Language* Commission? Well, although we deal with only English ourselves, we believe it's important to encourage writers of other languages to write clearly too. That's why we participate in various kinds of

international work to promote plain language. For example, we helped establish Português Claro (<http://www.portuguesclaro.pt>); we write for *Clarity*, the international journal on plain legal language; and we participate in PLAIN's discussions and conferences.

In contrast, one company offering editorial services writes: 'We have always believed that plain English is the clearest as well as the safest communication anywhere.' It may have a point in regard to commercial aviation, where pilots and air-traffic controllers communicate in English worldwide. But we think clarity matters to everyone in all languages.

Sometimes people also ask us why we chose 'Commission'. When Martin Cutts founded Plain Language Commission in 1994, he aimed to:

- offer an authoritative source of information and research-based evidence on plain-language issues
- provide a commercial service of document improvement and clear-English accreditation.

'Commission' sounded authoritative and also told people we'd be accepting commercial commissions in the plain-language field. We've always made clear we're not part of the current or any other government.

Cows inseminated by seamen – how very naughtical

In *Pikestaff 6*, we reported that university dons were warning of students' weak language skills. On the day sixth-formers received their A-level results this summer, Alan Ryan, a leading Oxford don, claimed that universities are providing 'remedial secondary education' to thousands of undergraduates who fail to master the basics at school. 'Less than 50 per cent...gets five decent GCSEs including maths and English,' wrote Mr Ryan in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. 'We are therefore intending to give degrees to students who can't get a C at GCSE in maths and English. Why?'

And the *Yorkshire Post* published a piece by Dr Bernard Lamb, who, having taught genetics at Imperial College for many years, has noticed a downward drift in writing standards among his undergraduates. The article lists some of the errors they make, including:

- *insemination of these cows at the age of three with their fathers seamen*
- *rouge genetic elements*
- *several plants are sewn together*
- *conceive carrier females and normal suns*
- *there are many more pre-natal multiple births than recorded live births.*

Dr Lamb says of his latest survey of students' English standards: 'The students best at English were the Singapore Chinese and a Bruneian; some UK students were good, making only a few errors. The worst were UK-raised and usually of British ancestry. It is not a matter of intelligence, as the three final-year students who made the most errors obtained two firsts and an upper second class honours degree this summer; all three are UK-raised women of British ancestry.'

You can read an article by Dr Lamb on our website at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=34>.

[Sources: *Daily Mail*, 16 August 2007; and *Yorkshire Post*, 22 August 2007]

Plain Language Commission news

More new articles published on our website

As well as Dr Lamb's article, 3 other articles are new to the *Articles* page of our website (<http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=34>):

- Sarah Carr and Martin Cutts have had a joint article published in the latest issue of *Clarity*. **Linguistics Nasties and Niceties** looks at whether to follow linguistic conventions in English that readers may think of as 'rules'. All the examples used are real, taken from UK newspapers and public and business documents.
- **Pupils see through the Internet Crystal** follows a complaint by a teacher that sites bearing the Internet Crystal Mark were full of poor English. This article reveals the remarkable results of our investigation.
- The closing date for entries to the annual Plain English Awards competition is coming up soon. Should our customers – or anyone else – bother to enter their documents and websites for scrutiny by the judges? To help you decide, **Plain English Awards scandal** reveals the untold story of the strong commercial connections between the event's promoter and several of the winners.

Another associate visits the palace

Ruth Thornton, star presenter of so many of our writing-skills courses, has also had a majestic meeting. But she was there on her own merit (rather than through owning a mobile home, as Eurocamp euphemistically calls its caravans – until recently, its tents were 'canvas accommodation').

We reported in *Pikestaff 2* that Ruth had become a prize-winning author. *The Adult Learners' Writing Guide* (Chambers, 2006) won 'highly commended' in the HRH The Duke of Edinburgh English Speaking Union English Language Award 2006. So Ruth and her publisher were invited to a presentation at Buckingham Palace, where they met the duke, who congratulated Ruth on her achievement.

'Nobody knows what I need except me.'

Enquire, the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning, has been awarded the Clear English Standard for its latest guide. The guide should help education professionals to involve children and young people in decisions about their education. It could also be useful to anyone else who wants to help children and young people to take part, including:

- parents and carers
- health and social work professionals
- youth workers
- children's charity workers.

The guide includes lots of quotations from young people, which help to illustrate the points – the quote in the heading is one example.

Katy MacDougall of Enquire approached Plain Language Commission to help ensure that the guide is written as clearly as possible: 'We work hard to make high-quality guides that are useful and clear. People often tell us they like our guides because they are "readable" – getting the Clear English Standard helps us achieve this.'

Enquire is funded by the Scottish Executive and managed by Children in Scotland. You can read more about Enquire at <http://www.enquire.org.uk>.

Ambiguity corner

Don't crash and burn (your dinner)

A reader (no name, to protect the pedantic) emailed with an interesting ambiguity in an advert on his company's website. This describes a revision audio-CD as '...an ideal way to revise while in your car, cooking dinner etc'. Keen to avoid the company being sued by multi-tasking customers who try to combine these incompatible activities, our prudent reader suggested adding 'or'. He obviously hasn't heard of the single man's standby: steak-and-onions wrapped in foil and placed on the engine while you drive to the pub. Just ten minutes, and it's cooked to perfection.

Law students up a gumtree

This notice was spotted in the urinals at a law school: 'Chewing gum and other rubbish can cause a blockage.' *Pikestaff* asks 3 questions:

- Are we talking blockages in the urinals or the chewer's alimentary canal?
- Do many law students chew rubbish?
- Can the simple act of chewing gum (or indeed rubbish) really block urinals, wherever you later dispose of it?

Officers on the beat?

'Act now to beat young thugs, says police chief.' So read the *Daily Telegraph's* front-page headline on 15 August 2007. But it was merely an exhortation to ban street boozing and raise the legal age for buying alcohol to 21, not a call for the return of the lash.

Expectations grate

A company's press release states: '...we expect our results for the year ending 31 July 2007 to be in line with expectations'. Well you would, wouldn't you?

Our e-shop...

...has been reborn in a new guise. You can now pay by Paypal or sterling cheque. If you have a UK postal address, you can buy direct from the site. If you don't, you'll need to email us first, stating what you wish to order and your full address. We can then work out the shipping cost and send you a price.

Contribute

Email us with your views, examples, and ideas for future stories at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

Back issues

You can see back issues of *Pikestaff* on our website (click on 'Newsletter').

Tell a friend

If you think a friend or colleague would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward it to them.

Spread the word

We're happy for you to use any of our articles to promote plain language, provided you acknowledge *Pikestaff* as the source.

Rolling the credits

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